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ABSTRACT

This guidebook is designed to help graduate teaching assistants plan a college course more effectively and efficiently. It is based on information from instructors in community colleges, liberal arts colleges, and universities regarding how they plan their courses. Course planning considerations are presented, sequenced generally in the manner used by faculty. A checklist at the end of the book summarizes the key course planning issues addressed. General teaching guidelines are offered concerning such issues as test construction and strategies to improve class discussions. Certain key resources on curriculum and learning theory are noted. After an introduction, the guide identifies 10 course planning steps: (1) define educational purposes, (2) set course goals, (3) select course content, (4) arrange course content, (5) consider student goals and characteristics, (6) choose instructional modes, (7) select readings and activities, (8) write a syllabus, (9) plan to get student feedback, and (10) seek advice from colleagues and experts. A final section encourages improved course planning. A bibliography listing about 15 books and about 100 periodicals is included. (SM)

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2

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Planning a College Course: A Guidebook for the Graduate Teaching Assistant

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Your Comments Invited

We wish to make this booklet as helpful as possible and therefore invite your thoughts, experiences, suggestions, and comments. Please address them to:

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Contents

Preface vi

I. Introduction 1

II. The Course Planning Steps 3

A. Define Educational Purposes 3

B. Set Course Goals 6

C. Select Course Content 12

D. Arrange Course Content 13

E. Consider Student Goals and Characteristics 16

F. Choose Instructional Modes 20

G. Select Readings and Activities 23

H. Write a Syllabus 25

I. Plan to Get Student Feedback 29

J. Seek Advice from Colleagues and Experts 30

III. Toward Improved Course Planning 31

Additional Sources of Information

A. General Teaching Guides 32

B. Periodicals on Teaching and Learning in Higher Education 33

C. Curriculum and Learning Theory Sources 39

Summary Checklist 42

Preface

As graduate teaching assistants who are also research assistants at the National Center for Research to Improve Postsecondary Teaching and Learning (NCRIPTAL), we have learned much from the research role that can make our teaching roles more effective. We proposed this project to share what we have learned with other teaching assistants.

We bring varied educational backgrounds to this project. Gretchen, a doctoral student in higher education at The University of Michigan, has a B.A. in anthropology from Cornell University and an M.A. in anthropology and a Certificate in Museum Practice from The University of Michigan. Her research interests are curriculum and international and comparative education. Michael, a doctoral candidate in political science at The University of Michigan, has a B.A. in political science from the University of Akron, an M.A. in philosophy from Ohio State University, and an M.A. in political science from The University of Michigan. His research interests are in international organizations and law, foreign economic policy making, and East Asian international relations. We have taught courses in anthropology, archaeology, logic, and world politics.

We think our experience as both higher education researchers and teaching assistants in other disciplines enables us to translate education research into teaching practice.

We gratefully acknowledge the help and advice of many people who contributed to the making of this guidebook. We owe our greatest debt to the directors of NCRIPTAL's Research Program on Curriculum: Joan S. Stark, Director of NCRIPTAL and Professor of Higher Education, and Malcolm A. Lowther, Senior Researcher and Professor of Education. They encouraged us to undertake this project and then helped us carry it off. Many of the ideas presented in these pages are theirs.

We also owe many thanks to our fellow research assistants on the Curriculum Program, Richard Bentley, Michele Genthon, Kathleen Shaw, and Patricia Wren, who have been good reviewers and good friends.

Several teaching assistants from around the country read and commented on an earlier draft of the guidebook and the result is a much better and more useful guidebook. We appreciate the comments of Michael Bressler (Political Science, University of Michigan), Kay Cook (English, University of Colorado at Boulder), Jon Culbertson (Philosophy, Ohio State University), Douglas Dowd (Art, University of Nebraska—Lincoln), Shelley Fuller (Art, University of Nebraska—Lincoln), Chris Lenhardt (Political Science, University of Michigan), Elizabeth Nielsen (Political Science, University of Michigan), Robert Snyder (Political Science, University of Michigan), and Detlef Sprinz (Political Science, University of Michigan). We also thank Laura Border, Director, Graduate Teacher Program, University of Colorado at Boulder, for helping us find critics and Charles Ryan, Alliance High School, Alliance, Ohio, for being an engaging critic.

Finally, we thank NCRIPTAL staff members who polished this version: editor Mary Joscelyn and secretaries Janie Knieper and Christine Eldred.

We tried to be diligent scribes, penning all of the good ideas for our readers. However, since in the end the words are ours, the responsibility for the guidebook is ours.

I. Introduction

Teaching is a primary endeavor of any college faculty member or graduate teaching assistant. College teachers have a serious responsibility to provide students with the best possible learning experience. Great teachers can sometimes appear to the rest of us to possess some mysterious, elusive genius that is the product of more inspiration than effort. We believe, however, that a little effort before the first class begins can improve the course greatly for both teachers and students by clarifying goals and presenting ways of achieving them. This guidebook aims to help you, the graduate teaching assistant, plan a college course more effectively and efficiently. We contend that by being made more aware of the range of course planning options all college teachers can plan better courses.

Hundreds of college teachers and students from around the United States contributed to this guidebook. We and our fellow researchers from NCRIPTAL asked instructors from community colleges, liberal arts colleges, and universities how they plan their courses. Instructors from many academic disciplines—from biology to business, from mathematics to history—described the factors that influence their course planning. Their course planning considerations are presented here, sequenced generally in the manner used by faculty. The course planning process, however, is for most faculty not as linear as it appears here, and the steps in the process can be sensibly carried out in other sequences. Indeed, when planning our own courses, we try to consider student goals and characteristics before selecting and arranging course content even though NCRIPTAL research indicates that we are in the minority.

As a teaching assistant, you may not find all sections of this guidebook immediately useful because you may not control all planning decisions (e.g., topics to be covered, selection of

readings). We have included all of the topics, however, because many TAs, especially later in their graduate careers, are asked to teach a course on their own. Our experience also indicates that even TAs who "merely" assist a senior lecturer by leading discussions make more course planning decisions than they sometimes realize.

We hope this guidebook helps all TAs regardless of the extent of their course planning autonomy. We hope, too, that this guidebook can serve a longer-term goal of helping prepare teaching assistants for teaching careers. We urge you to use teaching responsibilities in graduate school as an opportunity to refine your pedagogical skills.

In the following pages, you are asked to define for yourself the purposes of education as well as to set specific goals for the course. We present several steps that will help you plan your course. A checklist at the end of the book conveniently summarizes the key course planning issues addressed here. An annotated bibliography directs you to more information about course planning and related issues. The bibliography includes the names of teaching journals written by and for instructors in specific disciplines (such as *Science Education* and *The History Teacher*) as well as journals that report research in higher education. We also provide general teaching guides that discuss such issues as test construction and strategies to improve class discussions, and some of the key resources on curriculum and learning theory are noted.

This guidebook does not intend to duplicate the efforts of many fine guidebooks on college teaching already available (some of which are listed in our bibliography). Many of these guidebooks offer much useful advice on what to do after the first class meeting. We believe course planning, which takes place *before* the first meeting, has been given inadequate consideration; this guidebook offers a remedy.

II. THE COURSE PLANNING STEPS

A. Define Educational Purposes

> ***"I think you need to build on principles—basic principles. You have to have a foundation with which to work. Otherwise, it won't really make any logical sense to talk about what comes after...."***
>
> —Biology instructor

The TA's beliefs about the purposes of education set the course goals at the broadest level. What is education all about?

All educators must articulate for themselves a core set of beliefs about the purposes of education. NCRIPTAL research shows that educators from the same discipline tend to hold similar beliefs and that some disciplines tend to be more alike than others. For example, a belief in "effective thinking" is held by many instructors in all disciplines; "vocational" beliefs tend to be held among instructors in such fields as business and nursing; a belief in "clarifying values" tends to be held by sociology and psychology faculty. You may find that one or more of the beliefs offered here accurately describe your views, or you may wish to propose your own.

Decide which of the following beliefs about the purposes of education are most similar to your own. If more than one seems appropriate, you may want to rank the beliefs you choose. (For additional information about the origins of these purposes, see NCRIPTAL's publication, *Planning Introductory College Courses.*)

Social Change

In general, education aims to make the world a better place for all of us. Students must be taught to understand that they play a key role in attaining this goal. To do this, course content must be related to contemporary social issues. By studying content that reflects real life situations, students learn to adapt to a changing society and to intervene where necessary.

Effective Thinking

The main purpose of education is to teach students how to think effectively. As they interact with course content, students must learn general intellectual skills, such as observing, classifying, analyzing, and synthesizing. Such skills, once acquired, can transfer to other situations. In this way, students gain intellectual autonomy.

Systematic Instruction

Whatever the curriculum, effective education demands that instructors attend closely to instructional processes. Goals and objectives should be clearly specified and course procedures should be systematically designed to achieve the objectives. In part, my success as an instructor depends on the degree to which students achieve the objectives by the end of the course.

Vocational

Education should provide students with knowledge and skills that enable them to earn a living and contribute to society's production. My task is to help students achieve their vocational goals.

Personal Enrichment

Education should involve students in a series of personally enriching experiences. To meet this broad objective, content

should be selected that allows students to discover themselves as unique individuals and thus acquire personal autonomy. Activities and content ought to be individualized for each student.

Great Ideas

Education should emphasize the great products and discoveries of the human mind. Thus, select content from the discipline to cover the major ideas and concepts that important thinkers in the discipline have illuminated. Successful learning means students are able to demonstrate both breadth and depth of knowledge in a discipline.

Clarify Values

Whatever the course, it should help students clarify their beliefs and values and thus achieve commitment and dedication to guide their lives. The development of values is an educational outcome as important as acquisition of subject knowledge.

> ***"Vocationalism is an ugly word in most academic circles, but this only comes, I think, from an inevitable clash between a monkish, medieval concept of liberal arts education and the realities of a late twentieth-century mass education for a middle-class audience. Preparing young people for the world of work need not be seen as selling out to the Philistines."***
>
> —Liberal arts instructor

B. Set Course Goals

Now that you have defined the broad purposes of education, you are ready to set goals for your course. Course goals should take account of the goals of the college and department or program that offers your course. Does your school profess a distinctive mission? For example, does your school generally prepare students to go directly into a career? Or, does it primarily prepare students to enter graduate or professional school? Does your school stress the application of practical knowledge or a more theoretical or liberal arts education? Your school may administer a college-wide achievement test; if it does, you may wish to find out how your course can help students acquire the knowledge and skills called for by that test.

> ***"We really consider ourselves a liberal arts institution and we define a liberal education as an education which in some sense helps people develop skills that will help them with life."***
>
> —Philosophy instructor

If your department or program has a distinctive mission, acquaint yourself with its goals. Furthermore, TAs who assist senior lecturers should consider that person's goals; whether or not the goals match yours, you may still have sufficient freedom to augment the senior lecturer 's goals with those of your own.

"I want them to understand that science is a process, not a body of knowledge."

—Biology instructor

Your course is one course in a total curriculum that includes many courses. Locate your course on the curricular "map." You may find your course fits one or more of the following descriptions.

- ☐ a remedial course offered without degree credit
- ☐ a remedial course offered with degree credit
- ☐ a general education course for students with limited background in that discipline
- ☐ a general education course both for prospective majors and others
- ☐ an introductory course for prospective majors
- ☐ an introductory course in a technical career program
- ☐ an advanced course for majors
- ☐ a division-wide core course
- ☐ a college-wide core course

Locating your course on the curricular map is important; the relationship of your course to other courses matters even more if your course is tightly coordinated with other courses. Tight

coordination lessens your autonomy by reducing your planning options. Tight (or loose) coordination of courses may be good or bad, depending on the merit of the curriculum.

> ***"I think that our main purpose of education is to teach students how to think effectively. As a nurse you have to. So, I try to organize it so that the students have enriching experiences, ...to see themselves as being autonomous."***
>
> —Nursing instructor

As stated earlier, educators in many fields believe that teaching students to think effectively is the most important goal of education. If effective thinking is a key goal for you, then you need to consider strategies aimed at realizing that goal. Do not think of a discipline as a collection of facts or an encyclopaedic inventory of knowledge. A more useful way of thinking about a discipline is that it is organized around a set of problems and the aim of participants in the field is the solution of those problems. The problems and the problem-solving processes vary depending on the discipline. For example, the political scientist aims to solve interesting problems of political theory or of public policy while the artist may aim to solve a problem of artistic composition. Regardless of the disciplinary context, emphasis on problem-solving encourages students to become active participants in the learning process.

"Communication, verbal communication, is predicated upon common experiences to which words are applied. If there's not a common experience, nothing's happened. So, I work hard at illustrations."

—Philosophy instructor

Critical-thinking skills can be sharpened by providing concrete issues and problems for analysis. Exercises that remain abstract—for example, a logical proof—do not have the same illustrative power for the student as problems that can be related to experience. (Consider, for instance, the fallacious reasoning exhibited by basketball fans who believe that, because their team has the best five basketball players in the country, it is also the best basketball team in the country.) The instructor who emphasizes problems and concepts provides a structure into which facts, the empirical content of a discipline, can be organized and assimilated.

Students may find it helpful if the instructor relates the discipline under study to other fields. For example, how does sociology relate to anthropology and to the other social sciences? How does astronomy relate to physics and mathematics? The student who realizes intra- and interdisciplinary connections better understands how knowledge fits together.

"[Students should understand] what is meant by the humanities as an interdisciplinary study."

—History instructor

Do you aim to teach students the methods employed by researchers in your discipline? Do not reject out of hand the teaching of methods in introductory courses. Many instructors in introductory courses teach research methods because they believe beginning students can learn research methods and these methods can foster the acquisition of thinking skills. These skills may be useful to students even if they never take another course in your discipline. Furthermore, you may encourage some students (because they see how expert scholars in your discipline do what they do) to take more courses in your discipline.

> ***"The student [should] be able to use the scientific method, deductive and inductive reasoning, in the conduct of exercises and in the interpretation of experimental results."***
>
> —Biology instructor

Students' personal growth and development may be one of your goals. If so, you should devise strategies to help students do such things as

- evaluate themselves more searchingly
- tolerate opposing viewpoints
- understand their abilities and limitations
- think independently

- listen better

- acquire self-confidence

Plan activities that help students achieve these goals. The modes of instruction you use, which we discuss later, are important to achieving such ends.

> ***Writing is an excellent and immediate path to self-discovery and catharsis."***
>
> —Composition instructor

Course goals must be specified within the context of your course. Justify your course to yourself. How will students be better for the experience? You must decide what knowledge and skills to teach your students. Is there consensus in your discipline on the knowledge and skills that should be learned by completing an introductory course in chemistry, calculus, or Chinese? You must select goals decisively, lest you lead your students aimlessly. The process of thinking through essential knowledge and skills in the course can be a valuable synthesizing experience for the TA.

How will you know if your goals are appropriate? It may be some time before colleagues who teach your students in subsequent courses discover that you inadequately prepared them or before the students themselves reach that conclusion. Graduate students often remark that several years of graduate school may pass before they "put it all together"; course planning can be used to foster this integrative process. Student feedback, discussed later, is also critical to assessing your goals.

C. Select Course Content

> ***"I like to try to get the students to examine the different theoretical perspectives. The difference between a structural-functional perspective, which essentially is very order oriented...and then contrast that with something like Marxist theory, which, of course, is a conflict type of model...."***
>
> —Sociology instructor

Content is the "stuff" of the course. Carefully select content appropriate to your course goals. Does the topic convey an important or fundamental concept in your field? Does the topic illustrate a method of inquiry? Does the topic indicate guiding principles in your field? Does it teach a valuable skill that is one of your course goals? Remember, you are constrained in your selections by the length of the term as well as the ability of your students to understand the topic. Remember, too, that beginning teachers commonly over-estimate the amount of content that can be covered in the course. A delicate balance must be found between too little content, which leads to an insufficiently challenging course, and too much content, which leads to a rushed and harried term. It may be a good idea to leave some room in your course plan in case a topic takes longer than you predicted or in case an unexpected opportunity presents itself. Ask colleagues about their content selection and adopt feedback mechanisms that involve colleagues and students.

D. Arrange Course Content

The content of your course can be arranged many ways, but some arrangements may be preferable to others. We offer seven possible guiding principles of content arrangement that some instructors use. (These principles are adapted from "A Categorization Scheme for Principles of Sequencing Content" by G. J. Posner and K. A. Strike, published in the *Review of Educational Research*, vol. 46, no. 4, pp. 665-689. A discussion of these principles can also be found in NCRIPTAL's publication, *Reflections on Course Planning*.)

Structurally–Based

Organize the material so that it is consistent with the way relationships in your field occur or exist in the world. For example, use patterns such as spatial relationships, chronological relationships, physical relationships, or other natural occurrences.

Knowledge Utilization

Organize the material in ways that will help students use it in social, personal, or career settings. Thus, create problem solving situations and encourage students to take responsibility for solving real-life problems in a logical and organized fashion. Since it is not always possible to know the specific problems students will face or the skills they will need, try to select course material so that students encounter broad problem-solving strategies that may be useful in their lives and careers.

Conceptually–Based

Organize units around major ideas or concepts of the field so that understanding of these concepts evolves in a manner that represents important relationships. Organize material in such patterns as one of the following: (1) relationships of classes and

groups of objects or phenomena, (2) relationships of theory to application of theory, or rule to example, or evidence to conclusion, (3) relationships that proceed from simplest ideas to ideas of more precision, complexity, and/or abstractness, (4) relationships of logical sequence in which one idea is necessary to comprehend the next.

Learning–Based

Organize the material according to how students learn. For example, organize material according to one or more principles, such as (1) students should first learn skills that are likely to be useful in later learning; (2) students should encounter familiar ideas and simple phenomena before those that are more unfamiliar and complex; (3) students should understand an idea or concept before attempting to interpret and use it; or (4) students should encounter material geared to their readiness to learn.

Vocationally–Based

Organize materials in ways that will help students attain knowledge and skills needed in their chosen careers. Familiarity with practice and the needs of potential employers provide important guidance in arranging course content.

Knowledge Creation

Organize material according to the way in which knowledge has been created in the field. Structure the course around the processes of generating, discovering, or verifying knowledge. Therefore, include as primary foci of the course topics ways of drawing valid inferences and ways in which scholars in the field discover relationships.

Values–Based

Organize material in ways that will help students clarify and become committed to values and beliefs. Structure the course around such issues as dilemmas, ethical problems, or value dimensions that you know have implications for students as they try to lead fulfilling and exemplary lives.

NCRIPTAL research shows that faculty from the same discipline tend to use the same guiding principles when arranging course content. For example, romance language instructors tend toward "learning–based" arrangements. Biology and composition instructors tend to arrange courses according to "conceptually–based" and "learning–based" principles, respectively. Fine arts and history instructors tend toward "structurally–based" and "conceptually–based" arrangements, while nursing and business faculty tend to arrange according to "vocationally–based" and "conceptually–based" arrangements. Sociologists and psychologists tend to prefer "conceptually–based" arrangements. You may decide that, unlike the tendencies of your discipline, your course goals suggest one of the other principles as more sensible in arranging the content in your course.

Interestingly, students indicated to NCRIPTAL researchers that their best strategy for determining the important course content is not by what is on the tests but by the way the material is organized. The implication is important for us here: Arrangement of course content is vital for effective learning and should be done with the utmost care. Furthermore, disorganized course content leads to confusion. Regardless of your guiding principles, the content should be ordered so that no new skill, concept, or idea appears in the course before the students have the requisite skills, concepts, and ideas with which to learn the new subject. For these reasons, course content must be carefully arranged.

E. Consider Student Goals and Characteristics

> ***"Our students come predominantly from lower middle class and working class families. They come from small towns tending more on the rural, suburban, community structure continuum [and] relatively small high schools. They come from conservative churches in the main. And that results in my mind in a narrow world view."***
>
> —Sociology instructor

People go to college for many reasons: to get a better job, to become more broadly educated, to prepare for graduate or professional school. They also go to college because they have nothing better to do, their parents make them, they want to get away from home, or they want to join their friends who are going. The reasons your students are attending college and enrolled in your course are important because they tell you something about what you can expect from them in terms of motivation and performance.

Students have specific goals for signing up for your course. They bring different goals to "General Biology" than to "The Politics of the International Economy." A few examples of student goals include

- ☐ developing a philosophy of life
- ☐ learning to interpret numerical data
- ☐ understanding scientific principles and concepts
- ☐ becoming an informed voter

- ☐ learning to communicate effectively
- ☐ passing a certificate or licensing examination
- ☐ learning to solve complex problems
- ☐ learning to organize ideas
- ☐ understanding how researchers gain new knowledge

> ***"A lot of times they don't have the skills but I view that more as background that they've experienced rather than their fault. But, I find a positive attitude and a willingness to change, a willingness to learn...."***
>
> —Mathematics instructor

Students' specific course goals are many; the important questions are two: What are their goals, and how well do they fit with your goals?

At least two strategies may be used to find out about your students' goals. You can ask colleagues who previously taught your course what student goals tend to be. You can also ask students about their goals on the first day of class. Both strategies are problematic. Your colleagues' impressions may be inaccurate, and students' goals may vary from term to term. Also, you cannot ask students about their goals until the first day of class, which does not help in your pre-term planning. Despite the limitations, however, both strategies are worth using. Asking students about their goals on the first day of class helps to engage students from the outset in

active course participation and gives students a sense that they can have some influence on the course. You should not lead them to believe their goals will completely determine it.

> ***"Students seem to receive a minimum of counseling or guidance in class/course selection. They get most of their information from the school catalog and therefore frequently do not choose appropriately."***
>
> —History instructor

In addressing how well students' goals fit the goals you've established for the course—you're fortunate indeed when their goals and yours substantially overlap. When students have the freedom to select your course, that should often be the case. Of course, students may be taking your course because it is required or because it is the only course that fits their schedule; in such circumstances, the chances increase that the fit between instructor and student goals is loose. Then it is up to you to bring that fit closer.

> ***"So the student arrives to study art in firm possession of erroneous ideas about the very nature of what art is. If we allowed student goals to determine course content, our academic offerings would quickly be rendered meaningless, as art disintegrated into wildlife placemats and covered bridges."***
>
> —Fine arts instructor

An early task in the course should be to share your goals with your students. You are the expert. You know how important the knowledge and skills to be learned in your course are. Communicate that to the students. Provide reasons for your goals, however, since students are more likely to accept them if you offer sensible explanations.

> ***"My feeling is that it is part of my job to convince the student that [my course] is important.... [T]here are very good reasons why they probably think history isn't very interesting to them. And that's part of what I have to deal with...."***
>
> —History instructor

In addition to student goals, you should consider student levels, characteristics, and plans. Students who do not plan to major in your discipline may be less likely to take an interest in the more specialized aspects that you could raise in the course. Freshmen may need more direction than seniors who are comfortable with using the library, finding reserve reading rooms, and the like.

Consider, too, the students' typical levels of preparation, effort, and ability as well as the time pressures placed on them by job or family responsibility. These factors influence the content selection and pacing of the course. Well-prepared, industrious, and able students need to be kept moving at a brisk pace. Indeed, your task may be to stay out of their way! Students who confront heavy out-of-class time pressures, such as jobs or families, may need a bit slower pace.

Again, ask colleagues and students about student characteristics. Fortunately, this information may be easier to obtain than information on student goals. Faculty and college administrators are more likely to know something about student characteristics than student goals. If your college has an administrative office that collects information about student characteristics (and most do), find out what they can tell you.

F. Choose Instructional Modes

> ***"I personally learned more from experiencing and doing than from sitting down and reading from a text or from listening to a lecture. [My dad and I would] go walking...in the country and I'd learn by looking and experiencing instead of by just listening or reading."***
>
> —Biology student

Students learn both passively and actively. Passive learning takes place when students take on the role of "receptacles of knowledge"; that is, they do not directly participate in the learning process. One common passive instructional mode is the ever-popular lecture. Active learning is more likely to take place when students are doing something besides listening; the most common active instructional modes include class discussion, laboratory or clinical projects, and field experiences. Educational research and the experiences of seasoned instructors show that students learn more material, more quickly, and retain what they have learned longer if they learn using active rather than passive methods.

You can teach by lecturing, leading discussions, or mixing these two fundamental instructional modes. You can direct laboratory exercises or field work. Your choice of instructional mode depends on several considerations. First, how big will your class be? Second, how advanced are your students? Third, does the discipline lend itself more easily to one or another instructional mode? Many instructors believe that large classes necessitate the use of lectures. You may, however, be able to break a large class down into smaller groups, even briefly, so that discussion can be encouraged. Some educators contend that beginning students need to absorb much material and the most efficient way to dispense information is through the lecture. Advanced students, the corollary position holds, know enough to benefit from participation in discussions. There is reason to believe that the "efficiency" of which lecturers speak is not measured in terms of how much students learn or how fast. Above all, vary the mode of instruction within and between class sessions.

> ***"Most discussions that I was involved in as a student were not good discussions because either the professor asked questions that were so general in scope that there was no meaningful way to answer or else the questions were so specific that it's sort of insulting: 'Now what did this person say on this page?' I don't call that discussion...."***
>
> —Philosophy instructor

Students explained to NCRIPTAL researchers that they evaluate themselves not by noting their most recent test scores but by gauging their ability to communicate ideas, concepts, and skills to someone else and their ability to apply the learning in other courses

and contexts. The discussion mode of instruction, even among beginning students, may improve learning by moving that communication from the dorm room to the classroom.

It is well known that nursing instructors often plan clinical experience and biology instructors generally include laboratory work in the curriculum. Other examples of disciplines that encourage active learning come readily to mind. Some disciplines, however, do not so commonly take advantage of such opportunities. The innovative instructor can find interesting opportunities in nearly every community, such as the course in legislative process that performs a case study of the local city council or the marketing course whose students assist a local advertising firm on a project. Do not be inhibited by the long-established, well-worn practices of your discipline or by bureaucratic hurdles that at first appear formidable.

Finally, give some consideration to how computers can increase active learning. Computers are being used in nearly all disciplines now. The bibliography at the end of this guide includes sources of additional advice on selecting instructional modes.

G. Select Readings and Activities

> ***"I look for new books that are coming out. And I have to change the reading based on reading book reviews in the journals and advertisements from publishers and so forth."***
>
> —History instructor

First decide what kinds of readings you will use to supplement classroom activities. You can use basic organizing textbooks, monographs, journal articles, or a variety of these in combination. Using a textbook offers students an organizing source, one that attempts to integrate the course for the student. Unfortunately, you may not find a textbook that does that satisfactorily. If you do not use one organizing textbook, you should plan in class to help students organize and integrate knowledge in the course. Monographs and journal articles offer the opportunity to (1) study some topics in depth, (2) demonstrate how researchers and practitioners in the discipline do what they do, (3) provide various perspectives on a problem and approaches to the discipline, and (4) present fresh, up-to-date ideas. On the other hand, the beginning student may find such articles difficult to understand. Some combination of textbooks, monographs, and articles may be best.

Generally, and especially at the introductory course level, several textbooks on your course subject are available from various publishers. Check textbook advertisements in journals of your discipline; you can then order examination copies from the publishers. Check the book reviews of textbooks, which sometimes appear in the discipline journals. In addition, the

publishers generally display their textbooks at professional conferences, which offers a good opportunity to consider your alternatives.

Remember that books are not inexpensive. Consider the cost of the books under examination. Make certain that the cost is justified. If only a chapter or two of a book will be useful to your students, do not require students to buy the whole book; instead, place the book on reserve in the library or put small portions of the book into a course pack. Be careful to observe copyright laws (available from your photocopying source) if you make up a course pack.

The content, and the arrangement of that content, is the highest priority in book selection. Consider the book's accuracy; its presentation of key theories, principles, and concepts; its empirical base; and its level of discussion. Is the sequence of ideas properly ordered? If the material is arranged differently from the way you arrange course content, will students be confused? You should assess the content arrangement with the same vigor you use to analyze your course.

The text's prose should be clear and readable. Long sentences and paragraphs make reading difficult, as do awkward phrases and obscure language. Prose may have racial, ethnic, gender, or other biases. Unless your purpose is to demonstrate the use of biased statements and images, you should reject such books. Look at the book's presentation of text and graphics. Is the text clearly printed with typeface large enough to read easily? Are the graphics clear and useful? Does the book use headings and sub-headings sufficient to organize the text for the reader. Overall, is the book visually appealing? A visually unappealing book may discourage students from reading it.

Does the book have a good bibliography that students can use as a reference for further study? Finally, are supplemental materials available (such as workbooks, computer software, or an instructor's manual)?

For instructors as well as students of any subject, the learning process never ends. Graduate teaching assistants may be especially aware of knowledge and skill limitations; consider augmenting regular classroom activities with the visits of experts. A chemist from a nearby chemical plant, an economic analyst from a local bank, or a senior professor with special expertise may introduce interesting variety into your course. It is usually easy to find people who would enjoy speaking with your students. Some TAs tell tales of having been pleasantly surprised when high-powered experts accepted their invitations by saying that they would be delighted because it sounded like fun.

H. Write a Syllabus

> ***"[The instructor was] really clear about what she expected from us. I know a lot of the time that's murky. I do better in class where they tell me exactly what they want, exactly when they want it, and I do that."***
>
> —Composition student

Instructors use a variety of techniques for communicating course plans and expectations to students. One important means of communication is the course syllabus. The course syllabus is unique in that it is a permanent written document of the course outline. Unlike verbal communications, the written syllabus leaves no question about what the instructor expects, when assignments are due, or how students will be graded.

Course syllabi take many forms. Some syllabi are merely single-page lists of assignments and due dates. Others are comprehensive documents detailing every conceivable aspect of the course. A neat, well-organized course syllabus is likely to give give the student confidence in the organizational ability of his or her instructor. Like the course plan, there is really no single right or wrong form. However, research and practice suggest that students benefit from more comprehensive syllabi just as they benefit from explicit discussions of expectations. Consider the following information that some faculty include in their syllabi, and choose that which seems appropriate to you.

Every course syllabus should contain basic information about the instructor and the course. Information about the instructor(s)—both the senior lecturer and graduate teaching assistant—should include his or her full name, office location and telephone number, office hours, home telephone number (if appropriate), and electronic communication procedures (if available). Information about the course should include the course title, course number, the number of credit hours, class meeting time and location, a catalog description, prerequisites, and the types of students for whom the course is intended.

As discussed earlier, the explicit statement of course goals and objectives minimizes confusion for the instructor and the student. Students are made aware of what they can expect to get out of the course and what is expected of them. Goals and objectives may include general course goals, specific assignment objectives, or statements of the relation of the course to student development, program goals, general education requirements, or institutional mission.

"Comments on student course evaluations suggest that there is a correlation between awareness of course goals and grades. D and F students (40%) demonstrate little understanding of either course goals or content! A, B, and C students generally show good awareness."

—Mathematics instructor

Faculty bring many different kinds of beliefs to the courses they teach—beliefs about students, about the purpose of education, and about the role of the teacher. These beliefs should be clearly laid out in the course syllabus to help the student better understand the professor and the course itself.

Almost every syllabus contains some sort of topic outline. In considering your topic outline, you must guard against seeming inflexible in your course structure by providing too much detail as well as seeming unorganized by providing too little detail. You might also include a definition of the discipline, assumptions you and others make about the discipline, a description of your discipline's mode of inquiry, a statement of your discipline's relation to other fields, a summary of the vocabulary and skill components of the course, and rationales for the course content and sequencing methods selected.

Other common syllabus components are the course calendar, a list of assignments, and due dates. Ideally, the course calendar should note special dates, such as holidays and scheduled field trips or special activities. You might consider giving rationales for the course assignments to help students understand why you believe these assignments will help them learn.

Information about the textbook(s), other required readings, and supplementary readings is also important. Be sure to include information about the title, author, edition, and availability of materials students will have to purchase. Including the location and available hours of the reserve reading room will be helpful to students. You may also want to consider supplying students with a supplemental bibliography they can refer to for further readings.

Describing the modes of instruction you will use will help the students become aware of their responsibilities in the learning process. Since all students are concerned with how they will be graded, the syllabus should explicitly spell out how students will be graded and what kind of feedback they can expect.

Many students are not aware of the resources available to them to assist their learning. A list of such facilities—computer centers, learning labs, tutoring centers, libraries, etc.—as well as their hours and policies will help the student become familiar with campus resources.

For additional help with syllabus writing, see NCRIPTAL's publication on preparing course syllabi for improved communication.

I. Plan to Get Student Feedback

Even after you have planned your course, it will be important to get student feedback regularly. Ask yourself, what is working and what is not working, what is confusing or dull, what is helpful or fascinating? Feedback can be obtained in many ways. Instructors often use the following indicators to determine that students are (a) actively involved in learning and (b) understanding their goals, content, and arrangement:

- ☐ examine quizzes or exams
- ☐ observe student faces and other body language
- ☐ monitor class participation and attendance
- ☐ monitor frequency of after-class discussions or questions and visits to office hours
- ☐ monitor frequency of completed assignments
- ☐ analyze student papers
- ☐ examine periodic course evaluations
- ☐ analyze student journals
- ☐ observe students in laboratories and field work
- ☐ ask students directly

Students may not understand your goals and content selection until months or even years later. You may want to try to get feedback from former students to help you change your goals and content to meet student needs. But the best time for you to make your own notes about what did and did not go well is after each class session.

J. Seek Advice from Colleagues and Experts

> ***"When I need advice, I turn to friends and colleagues I trust, and whose educational values are similar to mine."***
>
> —Mathematics instructor

You can get advice from people on your campus. Among the best sources are graduate student colleagues and faculty in your own discipline, since their knowledge and experience is most directly relevant to your concerns. Problems concerning the goals, content, and content arrangement may also be solved with the advice of a capable colleague. But faculty colleagues are not the only good source; many colleges have instructional development offices that offer course planning help and advice to instructors. Instructional development staff generally are not specialists in your discipline, hence they cannot advise you on specific goals or content. Nevertheless, they can suggest alternative instructional modes, assist you with test construction, and help you solve similar problems. Many disciplines have journals devoted to the teaching of the subject (as opposed to research or practice). We list many of these journals in the bibliography.

III. TOWARD IMPROVED COURSE PLANNING

> ***"Anyone who can teach and who knows his field needs no more preparation than a couple of shots of Irish whiskey."***
>
> —College instructor

We believe that a great deal more than "a couple of shots of Irish whiskey" is essential for good teaching. We hope this guide provides you with a logical process to follow in planning your college courses—both those you are planning now as a graduate teaching assistant and those you will eventually plan as a full-fledged faculty member.

We have tried to include a comprehensive set of issues that we hope will make you aware of the broad range of possibilities that exist in college teaching. In considering these options, your course plan and your teaching are bound to improve. The annotated bibliography will provide you with a number of references for more in-depth discussions of many of the issues we have highlighted.

The process described will be an investment of time and energy with handsome payoffs. For your perseverance, you will have become a better course planner and a better teacher; your students are certain to appreciate your efforts on their behalf.

Good luck and best wishes for successful teaching.

ADDITIONAL SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. General Teaching Guides

Byrd, Patricia, Janet C. Constantinides, and Martha C. Pennington. (1988). **The Foreign Teaching Assistant's Manual.** Indianapolis: Macmillan.

Notable for its coverage of language issues, as well as profiles of typical American students and college teachers.

Cahn, Steven M. (ed.). (1978). **Scholars Who Teach: The Art of College Teaching.** Chicago: Nelson-Hall.

Seven highly regarded scholars who are also award-winning teachers of history, English, mathematics, physics, political science, Romance languages, and music thoughtfully describe the relationship between scholarship and teaching and offer advice on effective teaching of their subjects.

Eble, Kenneth E. (1988). **The Craft of Teaching: A Guide to Mastering the Professor's Art** (2nd edition). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Witty, friendly, insightful, a good read. See especially the judicious consideration of term paper assignments and problem situations, such as the inevitable "bad class."

Hyman, Ronald T. (1974). **Ways of Teaching** (2nd edition). New York: J.B. Lippincott Company.

Intense, philosophical, conceptually rich. Thorough analysis of various methods of teaching: Socratic, simulation games, sociodrama, lecture, discussion. For the reflective educator, not the harried TA.

Janes, Joseph, and Diane Hauer. (1988). **Now What? Readings on Surviving (and Even Enjoying) Your First Experience at College Teaching.** Littleton, MA: Copley Publishing Group.

Comprehensive collection of readings culled from many teaching and TA guidebooks. Handy, animated, large format.

Lowman, Joseph. (1985). **Mastering the Techniques of Teaching.** San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Valuable, fascinating, and approachable synthesis of research in higher education and educational psychology; it argues that good teaching depends most on highly developed interpersonal and communication skills.

McKeachie, Wilbert J. (1986). **Teaching Tips: A Guidebook for the Beginning College Teacher** (8th edition). Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath.

The classic. Clear, practical, thoughtful, wise. Should be on every TA's bookshelf. Especially helpful for its tips on assigning grades, leading discussions, and constructing tests.

B. Periodicals Related to Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

The following periodicals have been approximately subdivided into five categories: General, Humanities, Professions, Sciences, and Social Sciences. Some of these periodicals may also fall into more than one category.

General

AAHE Bulletin (American Association for Higher Education)

Adult Education (London)

Adult Education (Washington)

Adult Leadership

American Educational Research Journal

ASHE/ERIC Higher Education Report Series

Assessment in Higher Education (newsletter)

British Journal of Educational Psychology

Change (The Magazine of Higher Education)

The Chronicle of Higher Education (weekly newspaper)

College Student Journal

College Teaching
(formerly **Improving College and University Teaching**)

Community and Junior College Journal

Community-Junior College Research Quarterly

Convergence: International Journal of Adult Education

Educational Record

Educational Technology

Educational Theory

Higher Education (Europe)

Higher Education Abstracts
(formerly **College Student Personnel Abstracts**)

Innovative Higher Education
(formerly **Alternative Higher Education**)

International Encyclopedia of Higher Education

Journal of Adult Education

Journal of Classroom Interaction

Journal of College Student Personnel

Journal of Educational Research

Journal of Experiential Learning and Simulation
(ceased publication in 1981)

Journal of Experimental Education

Journal of General Education

The Journal of Higher Education

Journal of Instructional Development

Journal of Negro Education

Journal of Staff, Program, and Organizational Development

New Directions Quarterly Sourcebooks (Jossey-Bass Publishers)

- **New Directions for College Learning Assistance**
  (ceased publication in 1983)
- **New Directions for Community Colleges**
- **New Directions for Continuing Education**
- **New Directions for Experiential Learning**
  (ceased publication in 1983)
- **New Directions for Higher Education**
- **New Directions for Institutional Research**
- **New Directions for Mental Health Services**
- **New Directions for Program Evaluation**
- **New Directions for Student Services**
- **New Directions for Teaching and Learning**

Personnel and Guidance Journal

Research in Higher Education

Resources in Education (ERIC Clearinghouse abstracts)

Review of Educational Research

Review of Higher Education

Review of Research in Education

Simulation & Games

Simulation/Gaming/News

Studies in Higher Education

Teachers College Record

Telescan

Training and Development Journal

Humanities

College Composition and Communication

College English

Communication Education

The History Teacher

Journal of Aesthetic Education

Journal of Creative Behavior

Journal of Moral Education

Journal of Research in Music Education

Liberal Education

Metaphilosophy

Religious Education

Research in the Teaching of English

Teaching History: A Journal of Methods

Teaching Philosophy

Theological Education

Professions

AV Communication Review

Engineering Education

Journal of Architectural Education

Journal of Dental Education

Journal of Education for Librarianship

Journal of Education for Social Work

Journal of Legal Education

Journal of Medical Education

Journal of Nursing Education

Journal of Pharmaceutical Education

Journal of Psychiatric Education

Journalism Educator

Learning and the Law

Media and Methods

Medical Education

Medical Teacher

Nurse Educator

Organizational Behavior Teaching Review (formerly **Exchange: The Organizational Behavior Teaching Journal**)

Sciences

American Biology Teacher

American Journal of Physics

American Mathematical Monthly

Behavioral Science Teacher

Instructional Science

Journal of Applied Behavioral Science

Journal of Biological Education

Journal of Chemical Education

Journal of College Science Teaching

Journal of Research in Science Teaching

Mathematics Teacher

Physics Teacher

Social Sciences

Anthropology and Education

Counseling Psychology

Educational Psychologist

Journal of Economic Education

Journal of Educational Psychology

Journal of Geography

Journal of Geography in Higher Education

Political Science Teacher, The
(formerly **Teaching Political Science**)

Small Group Behavior

Sociology of Education

Teaching of Psychology

Teaching Sociology

C. Curriculum and Learning Theory Sources

Cross, K. Patricia, and Thomas A. Angelo. (1988). **Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for Faculty.** Ann Arbor, MI: National Center for Research to Improve Postsecondary Teaching and Learning.

Explains easy-to-use techniques for measuring subject matter learning, critical thinking improvement, and student assessments of the teaching methods.

McKeachie, Wilbert J., Paul R. Pintrich, Yi-Guang Lin, and David A. F. Smith. (1987). **Teaching and Learning in the College Classroom: A Review of the Recent Literature.** Ann Arbor, MI: National Center for Research to Improve Postsecondary Teaching and Learning.

Argues that the "best" method of teaching depends on such variables as student characteristics, goals to be achieved, instructor's teaching strategies, and course content. Indicates ways of measuring and altering these variables.

Posner, George J., and Alan N. Rudnitsky. (1986). **Course Design: A Guide to Curriculum Development for Teachers.** New York: Longman.

Aimed at the elementary and secondary teacher, but offers useful advice for college teachers.

Stark, Joan S., and Malcolm A. Lowther, with assistance of Sally Smith. (1986). **Designing the Learning Plan: A Review of Research and Theory Related to College Curricula.** Ann Arbor, MI: National Center for Research to Improve Postsecondary Teaching and Learning.

Both higher education literature and pre-college literature are reviewed.

Stark, Joan S., Malcolm A. Lowther, Michael P. Ryan, Sally Smith Bomotti, Michele Genthon, Gretchen Martens, and C. Lynne Haven. (1988). **Reflections on Course Planning: Faculty and Students Consider Influences and Goals.** Ann Arbor, MI: National Center for Research to Improve Postsecondary Teaching and Learning.

Reports findings from extensive interviews of faculty and their students from many disciplines on how they plan their courses. Develops a course-planning model.

Stark, Joan S., Malcolm A. Lowther, Richard J. Bentley, Michael P. Ryan, Michele Genthon, Gretchen G. Martens, and Patricia Wren. (1989). **Planning Introductory College Courses: Influences on College Faculty.** Ann Arbor, MI: National Center for Research to Improve Postsecondary Teaching and Learning.

Reports findings from nationally representative survey of faculty teaching in twelve disciplines, and refines a course-planning model developed earlier.

Summary Checklist

The following checklist will serve as a quick review of the steps covered in detail in the text. The checklist is not designed to replace the text but to provide a quick refresher as you actually plan your course.

1. Define Educational Purposes

What are your beliefs about the purpose of education?

- ☐ To enable social change
- ☐ To teach effective thinking
- ☐ Necessitates systematic instruction
- ☐ To provide personally enriching experiences
- ☐ To teach the great ideas and discoveries of humankind
- ☐ To teach life skills
- ☐ To teach value clarification

2. Set Course Goals

Are your course goals affected by any of the following?

- ☐ Those of a senior lecturer for whom you teach
- ☐ Your program
- ☐ Your college mission

- ☐ The expectations of faculty teaching more advanced courses your students will enroll in later
- ☐ College achievement tests

On which is a greater emphasis placed?

- ☐ Teaching practical knowledge **or**
- ☐ teaching theory

- ☐ Teaching facts **or**
- ☐ teaching problem-solving skills

- ☐ Direct career entry after college **or**
- ☐ enrollment in graduate/professional school

- ☐ The discipline **or**
- ☐ student development

Where is your course located on the "curricular map"?

- ☐ Remedial course for no credit
- ☐ Remedial course for credit
- ☐ General education course for anyone
- ☐ General education course for majors and others
- ☐ Introductory course for majors
- ☐ Introductory course in a technical career program
- ☐ Advanced course for majors

- ☐ Division-wide core course
- ☐ College-wide core course

3. Select Course Content

What are the reasons for selecting content?

- ☐ Students find it enjoyable.
- ☐ It is easy to learn.
- ☐ It is a fundamental discipline concept.
- ☐ It teaches important skills.
- ☐ It illustrates the discipline's mode of research.
- ☐ It stimulates students to search for meaning.
- ☐ It encourages students to pursue the quest for knowledge.
- ☐ It interrelates fundamental/lower level concepts into broader/higher level concepts.

4. Arrange Course Content

Which of the following schemes do you use for arranging content?

- ☐ Naturally occurring relationships
- ☐ A desire to teach problem-solving skills
- ☐ The organization of major concepts
- ☐ How students learn knowledge

- ☐ Students' future career needs
- ☐ The order of knowledge creation
- ☐ A desire to help students clarify values

5. Consider Student Goals and Characteristics

What are the goals of your students?

- ☐ To learn about the structure of the field
- ☐ To learn to see relationships in the field
- ☐ To learn to see relationships between fields
- ☐ To understand scientific principles and concepts
- ☐ To learn to think critically and logically
- ☐ To learn to interpret data
- ☐ To become aware of and open to diverse views
- ☐ To gain an historic perspective
- ☐ To acquire aesthetic sensitivity
- ☐ To enhance creative abilities
- ☐ To learn effective communication skills
- ☐ To improve study skills
- ☐ To develop a personal code of ethics and values

- ☐ To look for meaning in life
- ☐ To acquire social skills
- ☐ To become aware of social issues
- ☐ To learn to help others
- ☐ To become a good citizen
- ☐ To pass an exam
- ☐ To prepare for a career
- ☐ To prepare for graduate or professional school

What are the characteristics of your students?

- ☐ Abilities and capacities
- ☐ Preparation
- ☐ Motivation
- ☐ Expectations
- ☐ Out-of-class pressures
- ☐ Previous college experiences
- ☐ Intended majors
- ☐ Learning styles

6. Choose Instructional Modes

To what extent is your choice of instructional mode affected by the following?

Student characteristics _____

Class size _____

Time constraints _____

Financial constraints _____

Discipline constraints _____

What teaching methods do you plan to use?

- ☐ Passive methods (lectures, films, readings, etc.)
- ☐ Active methods (discussions, laboratory or clinic)
- ☐ Projects, field trips, research projects, etc.

7. Select Readings

Will you use one or more textbooks, journal articles, or monographs?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Will you require students to buy books or coursepacks or do reserve readings?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If you require students to purchase textbooks, do they meet the following criteria?

- ☐ Absolutely necessary
- ☐ Reasonably priced and readily available
- ☐ Well-organized and visually appealing
- ☐ Unbiased—racially, sexually, or ethnically

8. Write a Syllabus

Does your syllabus include the following information?

- ☐ Instructor information
- ☐ Course information
- ☐ Course rationale
- ☐ Description of student characteristics
- ☐ Definition of beliefs about education
- ☐ Definition of beliefs about the teacher's role
- ☐ Outline of course content
- ☐ Course calendar
- ☐ Assignment list and rationale
- ☐ Information about textbooks and other readings
- ☐ Description of methods of instruction

- ☐ Discussion of feedback methods and policies
- ☐ Description of indicators of student learning
- ☐ List of learning facilities and resources available

9. Plan to Get Student Feedback

What methods will you use to obtain feedback from students?

- ☐ Quizzes or tests
- ☐ Papers or projects
- ☐ Attendance
- ☐ Facial or body language
- ☐ Class participation
- ☐ Coming to office hours
- ☐ Course evaluations

How often will you obtain feedback? _____

_____

10. Seek Advice from Colleagues and Other Experts

What types of people are most readily available to give you advice?

- ☐ Faculty mentor
- ☐ Another graduate teaching assistant
- ☐ Instructional development personnel

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